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TAGS: PGOV PINS PREL PTER KPAO KMDR US IZ IR

SUBJECT: KURDISH REACTION TO RAID ON IRANINA OFFICE
OVERSHADOWS BUSH SPEECH

Classified By: REGIONAL COORDINATOR JAMES YELLIN
FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (U) This is an Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

¶2. (U) Summary: Kurdish press and government officials reacted on January 12 to an early-morning security operation by Coalition Forces in Erbil the previous day in which five Iranians were taken for questioning.

Incorrectly describing the building at which the security operation took place as an Iranian Consulate, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani and other KRG officials condemned the operation as a violation of Kurdish sovereignty and called for the release of the Iranians. Commentaries in Kurdish news and blog websites accused the U.S. of bringing its conflict with Iran to the Kurdistan Region, and expressed fear of an increase in terrorist acts in the region.

¶3. (C) Privately officials of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the party of KRG President Massoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the party of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, differed in their assessment of the operation. KDP officials were more concerned with what they said was a lack of coordination between Coalition and Kurdish security forces, with some officials saying if they had been told about the operation they would have assisted in its execution. PUK officials, on the other hand, have been actively cultivating a relationship with Iran, and fear this operation signals a broader U.S. effort against Iran in the Kurdistan Region in light of the speech by President Bush on January 10. End Summary.

Media Reaction: KRG Officials Condemn the Operation

¶4. (U) At a time when President Bush's speech on the new Iraq strategy was expected to make headlines, the press was dominated on January 12 by news of an early morning security operation by Coalition Forces in Erbil in which five Iranians suspected of activities against Coalition Forces and Iraqi citizens were taken for questioning.

¶5. (SBU) Kurdish newspapers and television carried an official statement from the office of the KRG President, Massoud Barzani, on January 12 that condemned "the American action against the official consulate" of Iran as a violation of Kurdish sovereignty. It said, "No military action should be taken in the Kurdistan Region without consultations with security authorities here." (Note: The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs has said the office was an Iranian "liaison office" that does not have full consular status. End note.)

¶6. (U) The KRG Presidential Chief-of-Staff, Dr. Fouad Hussain, described the work of the liaison office on

Kurdistan TV, saying it provides consular services and helps Iranians in the region. He said that Iranian officials had been "kidnapped" and called for their release.

Media Reaction: U.S. Conflict with Iran Comes to Kurdistan

¶17. (U) The newspapers "Khabat" (Kurdish) and "Attaakhi" (Arabic), both run by the KDP, carried an editorial echoing these statements and saying the U.S. should not bring its conflict with Iran to Kurdistan: "The Kurdish people don't accept any political issue to be resolved on our land. The issue is between Iran and America."

¶18. (U) Commentaries on independent Kurdish news and blog web sites characterized the operation as an opening salvo in Bush's new Iraq strategy which aims to limit the influence of Iran in Iraq. The website "Kurdistan Press" posted a commentary that defended the humanitarian nature of the Iranian "consulate" in Erbil. The commentary predicted that if the U.S. brings its conflict with Iran to Kurdish soil it will also bring more terrorists to Kurdistan.

¶19. (U) The Kurdish-nationalist website "Kurdistan Post" carried a piece saying the U.S. was not only delivering a message to Iran with this operation, but also to Kurdish leaders. It said, "By raiding the consulate, America is giving a very clear statement to Barzani and Talabani, You are either with us or with the terrorists."

Private Reaction: KDP Disturbed by Lack of Coordination

BAGHDAD 00000169 002 OF 003

¶10. (S) KDP Officials publicly condemned the operation, but in private were less concerned about the nature and targets of the operation. No friends of the Iranians, their chief complaint was the lack of coordination between Coalition and local security forces, which they say produced confusion that could have been avoided. KDP Minister of Interior Karim Sinjari described to Regional Coordinator a brief but tense standoff between Coalition Forces and the Zerivan, an elite group of Kurdish special security forces, just prior to the departure of Coalition Forces from the area.

¶11. (S) Commenting on both the security operation and the subsequent standoff, Sinjari said the situation was "very bad." He continued, "We are your friends" and we could have helped you if we knew what you were doing." KRG head of Foreign Relations Falah Bakir said, "Such incidents can inadvertently lead to bloodshed. If we had been asked to help we would have provided help." He said the situation was an embarrassment and an insult to the KRG.

Private Reaction: PUK Fears Damage to Relations with Iran

¶12. (C) Head of PUK Foreign Relations Hewa Jaff told RRT PAO on January 11 that PUK officials are speculating this operation signals the start of a broader U. S. effort against Iran that could have negative consequences for PUK relations with their Iranian neighbors. (Note: PUK officials have been actively cultivating a relationship with Iran. On January 10, for example, Iraqi President Talabani--who as noted above is also the head of the PUK--met with an Iranian delegation and among other things concluded a deal to import from Iran to Sulaimaniyah Province 1.2 million liters of critically needed fuel each month this winter.)

¶13. (C) Jaff said PUK officials fear the U. S. wants to

"start the fight with Iran from here (Kurdistan)." He said the PUK will need to protect their fuel deal with Iran by distancing themselves from the operations.

Private Reaction: Proof That ISG Report "Is Dead"

¶14. (SBU) A number of local contacts say that Kurds are shocked by this incident which disrupts the relative quiet and sense of security enjoyed in the Kurdistan Region. In their discussions over the operation, they echo sentiments expressed by KRG officials in the media. Ordinary Kurds are speculating that there could be a series of similar operations that will place Kurdistan at the unwelcome center of the U.S.-Iran conflict. They are calling for a release of the Iranian "detainees" and an apology for damage done to Kurdish pride.

¶15. (SBU) Some Kurds are expressing the view that this operation, taken together with the speech by President Bush on January 10, is a more positive signal that Bush will not be held to the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group Report in his new Iraq strategy. These Kurds say the security operation carries out his promise to limit Iranian destabilizing influence in Iraq and rejecting the call in the report to enter into a dialog with the Iranians. These Kurds welcome the action and hope Bush will reject other elements of the report, such as the call for a delay in implementing the referendum on the status of Kirkuk. One Kurd commented, "This action shows that the Baker-Hamilton Report is dead."

Full Text of Official KRG Statement on January 11

¶16. (U) Begin Text: The Presidency and the Kurdistan Regional Government express their dismay and condemnation of the American action against the official consulate of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The consulate was opened by agreement between the governments of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and enjoys immunity and protection under the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

Unlike other parts of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region enjoys safety, security, stability and the rule of law. The U.S. action does not conform to the policy of attempting to spread security and stability throughout all of Iraq. No military action should be taken in the Kurdistan Region without consultations with security authorities here.

The people of the Kurdistan Region protest against and

BAGHDAD 00000169 003 OF 003

reject this action which violates our internal sovereignty. We do not accept that disputes with our neighboring countries should be brought onto our soil. We call for the immediate release of those arrested. End Text.
KHALILZAD